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AUTHOR Jacobs, Jeff
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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates experiential education to help students actively engage in learning and transfer learning beyond the classroom. The characteristics and advantages of experiential education also provide educators with a more rewarding and enriching teaching experience. Typically, experiential education is viewed as an enhancement to more didactic educational approaches. Educators use experiential lessons and initiatives to foster excitement in students or to take a break from the daily grind of handouts, lectures, and assignments. Rarely is experiential education seen as a central approach to learning. Common misconceptions of experiential education suggest that it must include high adventure and that experiential learning is achieved by simply designing lessons that are active. However, experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences and from opportunities in order to process, generalize, and apply learning. Opportunities for utilizing experiential education are limited by colleges and universities that seldom offer training and coursework related to experiential learning. In addition, most teachers rely on their prior teacher-centered learning experiences rather than explore the advantages of experiential learning. However, with the assistance of recent publications and an increasing number of trainings and workshops, teachers can begin to incorporate experiential education as a core component of their teaching. Teachers will need to take an active role in seeking out training, materials, and resources to help them move experiential education from being just a side dish to more of a main course. (LP)

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Experiential Education
The Main Dish, Not Just A Side Course

Jeff Jacobs

Mark, a seventh grade Math teacher, has planned a two-week unit on fractions. The first day is to include a fun, hands-on, and interactive lesson involving home made pies. Mark will have Apple Pies lining the desks and will direct the students to slice the pies to help demonstrate fractions and whole parts. The first day arrives and the smell of baked goods welcomes students, who eagerly take their seats with great anticipation of what is to come. As Mark brings forth the knives the learning and fun begin with pies being dissected, divided, and occasionally consumed. Students are able to easily understand the concepts of Ω, °, and a whole. It is a great day in room A-4 for both students and teacher.

The following day students are welcomed by the smell of warm ink as Mark greets them with a mountainous stack of handouts, hot off the school copier machine. All traces of Apple Pie have vanished from the classroom, with the exception of a small piece from the day before secretly stashed by Bill in Jessica's desk. Today is set-aside for serious work. The day will begin with a ten-minute lecture on fractions to be followed by independent seatwork. Mark is well prepared, having enough hand-outs to keep even the most ambitious fraction whiz busy into next month. Students work quietly and earnestly at their desks, some with their stomachs turned in knots, struggling with fractions and hoping for more Apple Pie days.

Setting the Table

Of the two days described above, which day would you prefer to be a student in Mark's classroom? What factors would you consider in making this decision? As an educator, which lesson would you prefer to deliver? Do you feel as though you could develop and implement a day, week, unit, semester, or school year of experiential curriculum? Does utilizing Experiential Education simply entail designing lessons that provide opportunities for students to be active? Where would you turn if you were interested in serving a steady diet of Experiential Education?

The Association for Experiential Education
2305 Canyon Blvd., Suite 100; Boulder, Colorado 80302-5651

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Advantages of Utilizing Experiential Education in the Classroom.

Too often students are becoming disinterested with school. The standard approach of lecturing at students, followed by textbook readings and homework assignments is not actively engaging students in the learning process. Students can have a hard time making connections between school work and real life application. Students do not understand the significance of the content that is being taught. Without improvements that allow for almost immediate applicability, students begin to call into question the relevance of their time spent at school.

The use of experiential education in the classroom can help students transfer learning to areas beyond the four walls of their classroom. Experiential education intentionally provides opportunities for students to be actively engaged in the learning process. Students move from being recipients of information to seekers of knowledge. The classroom can be transformed from a sterile and passive environment to an arena for exploration, discovery, and excitement. The relationship between teachers and students often changes from one of teacher and learner to a partnership of lifelong learners and co-conspirators. Educators shift away from being instructors dispensing facts to facilitators allowing students to learn from academically focused experiences. Students are offered more choices within their learning experience. These choices can increase a student's sense of ownership and make them a stakeholder in their own education. The characteristics and advantages of experiential education not only enhance student learning, but also provide educators with a more rewarding and enriching teaching experience.

Not Just a Side Dish

Experiential Education is often viewed as an enhancement to more didactic educational approaches. Educators use experiential lessons and initiatives to foster excitement in students or to take a break from the daily grind of handouts, lectures, and assignments. Rarely is experiential education seen as a central approach to learning. Many veteran teachers can not comprehend a setting where students work experientially throughout an entire school year mastering concepts, ideas, and objectives. Yet, other teachers would welcome the opportunity to establish an experiential curriculum, but do not have the training, background, knowledge, or bag-of-tricks to do so. Too often, as with Mark in the scenario described above, Experiential Education is seen as a side dish and not the main course.

A common misconception of Experiential Education is that in order for something to be experiential it must include high adventure, with participants scaling rock faces, navigating white water, or utilizing survival skills in the backcountry. For the purpose of this writing, experiential education will be defined as a process through which a learner

constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences' (AEE). This process does not require, nor suggest, that high adventure needs to serve as the direct experience.

A second misunderstanding regarding Experiential Education is that by simply designing lessons that are active one has successfully implemented Experiential Education. Serving Experiential Education as the main dish involves the intentional use of "experiences structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results" (AEE). Just as the reading of a story would be incomplete without questions for review, discussion, exploration, and evaluation, an experience would be incomplete without opportunities for processing, generalizing, and applying. One of the guiding principles for Experiential Education practice states that "Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis" (AEE).

Utilizing an experiential or adventure-based curriculum does not mandate that the entire learning process involves physical activity. Just as teacher-centered curriculums are often supplemented with hands-on experiences, so too can experiential lessons be enhanced with more didactic approaches. An example of how this collaboration can take place is the use of Jim Schoel and Mike Stratton's Gold Nuggets, Readings for Experiential Education, as a precursor for or capstone to adventuresome initiatives and lessons. In this instance, a carefully chosen reading can be woven into the fabric of an experiential lesson and provide valuable insights and clarification.

Why is experiential education not more prevalent?

Current teacher preparation programs rarely include coursework considering experiential education. The few universities and colleges that do offer experiential education programs usually do so within the fields of recreation and outdoor leadership, rather than education. The omission of experiential education from teacher preparation programs could be due to a number of factors including having to compete with more "traditional" areas of study such as reading and writing in the content area and educational psychology. Experiential education is not only missing from the course offerings, but is also left out completely of most methods courses. Unfortunately, experiential education has yet to establish itself in many academic circles as a relevant and important avenue for delivering curriculum and content to students.

In addition, many teachers teach from their own experiences. Very few teachers had the opportunity to learn and discover in an experiential environment as students. Just as parenting experts have been saying for years, "You are likely to parent as you were parented", it also can be said that teachers are most likely to teach as they have been taught. Therefore it becomes important to not only provide students with experiential education,

but also to create opportunities for administrators and teachers to "experience" experiential education. It is unrealistic to expect teachers to embrace experiential education as a method for delivering curriculum if they have not encountered the benefits, advantages, and effectiveness of experiential education first hand.

How can experiential education become more prevalent?

Even though there are few universities and colleges offering experiential education courses to future educators, more and more books and resource guides are being published targeting classroom and school use of experiential and adventure curriculums. Some publications that are available to teachers include; Adventure in the Classroom, by Mary Henton, Creating Classroom Communities, by Joyce Hankey & Peggy Walker Stevens, Into the Classroom, by Mitchell Sakofs & George P. Armstrong, and a Guide for Planning a Learning Expedition by Meg Campbell, Amy Mednick, & Leah Rugen (Project Adventure, Adventure Education Publications, 1999). These publications and others are helping to fill the void for educators that are searching for ways to expand their bag of tricks and hoping to bring experiential education into the classroom. Readers can choose from publications that simply list initiatives and lessons that have proven effective in the classroom to works that help teachers plan, design, create, and implement experiential curriculums.

In addition to purchasing publications, teachers can attend trainings, conferences, and workshops. Educators can turn to AEE's web site, www.aee.org, as a launching point for discovering valuable resource information. Several organizations and associations worldwide offer training and enrichment opportunities for educators. Training programs generally range in length from a day to a full week. Topics typically covered include; Building Community within the Classroom, Creating a Cooperative Spirit, Encouraging 100% Participation, Practical Problem Solving, Designing Experiential Lessons, Teaching Academic Content through Adventure/Experiential Activities, and Developing Units that utilize the Experiential Learning Cycle that can be implemented in the classroom. Workshops and Trainings are becoming more desirable to teachers and educators as attendees are able to gain valuable C.E.U. s (Continuing Education Units) or Graduate Credit. In addition, many school districts are making these opportunities more accessible by bringing trainers and programs to the school district during Inservice and Staff Development Days.

Summary

Experiential Education is not a new concept or methodology. Ever since John Dewey published Experience & Education in 1938 educators have been examining the

role that experience can play in the learning process (Dewey, 1938). However, experiential education has most often been viewed as an enhancement to more traditional methods of delivering curriculum. Rarely have teachers and administrators taken the challenge of creating and adopting a predominantly experiential approach to learning. The opportunities for utilizing experiential education are limited by colleges and universities that seldom offer training and coursework for future teachers. In addition, most current teachers were students in classrooms with more teacher-centered learning approaches and therefore replicate their prior experience, rather than experiential methods.

With the assistance of recent publications and an increasing number of trainings and workshops, teachers can begin to incorporate experiential education as a core component of their teaching. Experiential lessons no longer need to be reserved for only occasional usage. Teachers will need to take an active role in seeking out training, materials, and resources to help them move experiential education from being just a side dish to more of a main course. However, the rewards of this effort will be evident in the classroom as students take more ownership over their own learning and are able to make connections between educational experiences and lifelong learning. The use of experiential education in the classroom will challenge students and educators to reach their greatest potential.

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